BIBLIOTECA DIGITAL DE

MARIO CONSENS

Consens, Mario

2002 “Vikings and Rock Art in Paraguay: Ethno-Anthropological Discrepancies”. En “1999 International Rock Art Congress Proceedings”, eds. P.J. Whitehead, W. H. Whitehead, L. L. Loendorf y W.B. Murray, Vol. 2, págs. 209-214. American Rock Art Research Association. Tucson

Blackwell

Vikings and Rock Art in Paraguay: Ethno-Anthropological Discrepancies

In 1988 the first registers for Rock Art in Paraguay were initiated. Suprisingly, the greatest problem researchers had to overcome, were not in regards to the customary analysis of styles, but rather the firm belief by the society at large that their main task consisted of deciphering the "scripts at hand.

For many decades, individuals of great illusionary capabilities gave their time and energy to locate "writings" at different sites in Paraguay, explaining that the alleged texts were created in the past by visiting Celts, Vikings, Semites, and even Chinese. Misconsepts of this kind were printed in books, articles, and even in official textbooks for schools. It should be noted that such disparate hypothesis circulated in a country with seventeen different ethnic groups of different origins and where 95% of its inhabitants speak an aboriginal language (Guarani).

Mario Consens

Centro de Investigación de Arte

Rupestre del Uruguay

In October 1998, Ecocultura Foundation invited us to visit possible rock art sites in Northeast Paraguay. The following expedition was part of a project supported by this Institution in order to establish eco-tourism parks in that area, and to encourage visits to sites with "inscriptions" located inside or on the boundaries of the intended parks. One of the purposes of the Foundation was to get attention from international tourism agencies to visit different areas in Paraguay, emphasizing the fertile environment. Circuits of these planned tourist tours included actual indigenous villages and the Guaranies Catholic Missions raised by Jesuits in the 18th Century.

In the development of this project, Ecocultura found sites with engravings designated as "runic inscriptions". This curious identification of rock art was the first of a series of cultural discrepancies that ruled our activity in Paraguay.

After some meetings with the Ecocultura Foundation, it was decided that a survey of some sites had to be done as a preliminary stage. The major aim of this stage was to establish a project that would take into account the rescue of what was, for us, an unequivocally prehistoric art.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

Our visit to Paraguay established under the previous basis, includes:

1. Bibliographic research and analysis of publications related to prehistoric and historic periods. The later referred as "Pre-Colonial or Aboriginal Period" (Chaves, 1958).

2. To review previous archaeological research and information collected by occasional visitors to rock art sites.

3. Registration and documentation of the visited sites (sensu Consens, 1997) in the Amambay Mountains: Gasery and Lorito.

4. Visit the Governmental Authorities in the Ministry of Education and Culture, the Cultural Properties Directorate, and the Municipality of Pedro Juan Caballero. These visits also includs a visit to the Ethnographic Museum "Andrés Barbero".

5. Review the legal norms, approved in Paraguay, that refer to archaeological sites and National Heritage.

As a result of our visit we confirmed, in the first instance, the real existence of prehistoric rock art sites (Painted and engraved) in several places of Paraguayan territory. A large amount of these sites are in rock shelters, which have other archaeological remains in their surfaces.

The support of the designs were sedimentary rocks, so the aggression they suffered by extreme meteorological factors (given the Paraguayan subtropical and Mediterranean clime) and the full exposure of rock art to open air, produces a very

1999 IRAC Proceedings, Volume 2, P. & W. Whitehead and L. Loendorf, Editors, American Rock Art Research Association, 2002, pp. 209-214

Chaves, Julio César
1958 "*Compendio de Historia Paraguaya*". Talleres Gráficos LUMEN. 265 pgs. Buenos Aires.

Consens, Mario
1997 "San Luis. El arte rupestre de sus sierras". *Colección Investigación* 52-12. Fondo Editorial Sanluiseño. (2a. edición). 2 Vols. (300+85) págs. San Luis.-
1999 "Os milagres das taxonomias, ou a arte de fazer arqueologia" . *Actas da IX Reuniao Cientifica da SAB.* CD-ROM. Rio de Janeiro.

Gomez Rios, Emiliano
1952 "El Paraguay y su Historia". *El Arte.* 232 pgs. Asunción.

Escobar, Ticio
1982 "Una interpretación de las artes visuales en el Paraguay". *Colección de las Américas. Tomo I,* 310 pgs. Asunción.

Mahieu, Jacques de
1979 "*El Rey Vikingo de Paraguay*". Hachette, 180 pgs. Buenos Aires.

Ottolenghi, Aldo
1979 "*Culturas Prehistóricas*". Plus Ultra. Buenos Aires.

PallestrinI, Luciana y Jose Antonio Perasso
1984 "Arqueología: método y técnicas en superficies amplias". *Biblioteca Paraguaya de Antropología,* Vol. IV, 55 págs. Universidad Católica. Asunción.

Pistilli, Vicente
1978 "*Vikingos en el Paraguay*". Imprenta Cromos, 82 pgs. Asunción.

Prieto, Justo
1988 "*Paraguay. La provincia gigante de la Indias*". Archivos del Liberalismo. 243 pgs. Asunción.

Rossi de Zayas, Angelica e Irmina Claude de Lezcano
1994 "*Estudios sociales, 5° curso*". Talleres industriales Comuneros. 225pgs. Asunción.

Schobinger, Juan
1973 "*Experiencias psíquicas y cultos esotéricos reflejados en el arte rupestre sudamericano*". Actes Symposium International sur les Religions de la Prehistoire, pp.491-498. Valcamonica.

Susnik, Branislava
1991 "*Prof. Dr. Max Schmidt. Su contribución etnológica y su personalidad*". Museo Etnográfico Andrés Barbero, 54 pgs. Asunción.

Woodman, Jim
1989 "*The Ancient Inscriptions of Paraguay*". The Epigraphic Society. South America Chapter, Talleres El Gráfico srl. Asunción.

Figure 1: Paraguay In South America.

important degree of meteorization of the sites.

We have to add to these natural aggression factors, vandalism and alteration of the sediments of the sites. In particular, looting of archaeological materials and modification of the engravings made by some collectors and pseudo-archaeologists. We have found big trenches and deep holes in some sites that hopelessly distort their stratigraphy.

We were told some of the reasons, as explanations, for that irreparable vandalism. The rationale we got were another of the cultural discrepancies we secured in our visit to Paraguay. The looting of archaeological sites was not made to obtain indigenous materials. The holes and trenches were made to obtain Viking, Celtic or Egyptian treasures and iron axes allegedly left by these illustrious visitors to the Paraguayan territory. These trips were done hundreds or thousand of years before the recognized arrival of the first European conquerors to this area, arriving in 1537.

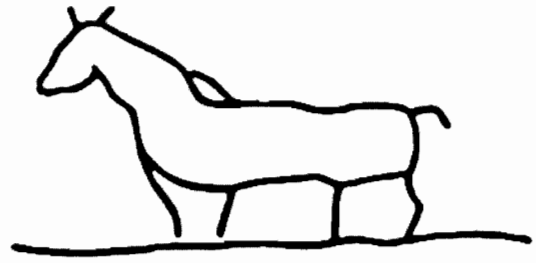

***Figure 2:** Engraving recognized as a "Normand cow" in Horse Shelter, Guazu Mountain (Paraguay). After Mahieu, 1979:111*

DISCREPANCIES

It is necessary to point out that our research activities in South America include 26 years of experience in several countries and regions. In each one of them, with different social and cultural contexts and knowledge levels, but in all cases with a unique reality: that there is a prehistory in the continent with several millennia of antiquity. This period was patterned with different human groups. The indigenous groups found at the time of the European invasion, were only the visible remains of that extended and large human experience.

However, this perception is very different in Paraguay, because it does not have an indigenous prehistory. This seems very unusual to foreigners like us, when we recognize that almost 100 % of the

***Figure 3:** "Odin on his horse Sleipner, jumping from one world to another", as identified in a Paraguay engraving. After Mahieu, 1979:84*

Figure 4: Engraving identified as a "French medieval shield, with 'incomprehensible' designs", on top of Kyse Mountain (Paraguay). After Mahieu, 1979:49

population speaks fluent Guarani, and that today at least 18 different ethnic groups inhabit Paraguay (Europeans included).

Current society denies not only the extensive past, but also credits the archaeological site remains to present indigenous people. When members of the society were confronted with rock art designs that undoubtedly could not be assigned to the actual indigenous groups, they circumvent the real performers of the rock art, with others that came from the most distant places in the world.

These surprising and unexpected discrepancies astonish the foreign researcher that came with other cultural context and creates for him considerable confusion.

The priority goal for our visit to Paraguay shifted from identification and documentation of sites, to persuading authorities, teachers, media and the public that what we found belonged to their own prehistoric culture. Engravings were not – as they emphatically sustained- inscriptions of groups that came from ancient Israel or from Medieval France.

The impact of or our scientific approach together with the reality of the indigenous context, did not produce the acceptance of our proposals, but it reached surprising reactions that have to be analyzed under an ethno-anthropological perspective.

THE FABLES OF AN ALIEN SOUTH AMERICAN PREHISTORY

This entire weird situation in a country inhabited by an indigenous majority has ample antecedents that determine the cultural, social and historic discrepancies observed.

As an example, in three of the official textbooks summing up 682 pages used in High Schools, only 14 pages make references to natives (Claude de Lezcano, 1987 & 1994; Rossi de Zayas & Claude de Lezcano, 1994). Those natives who are mixed and unmixed comprise 91 % of the Paraguayan population, belong to an official bilingual Nation where 96 % of their inhabitants speaks native Guarani.

From the first European contacts, historians saw the past as a cultural contend, where natives were considered as animals or as children that must be educated far away from their "natural" savagery tendencies. This premise was sustained up to this century. There we found the reasons and why it is not unexpected that indigenous art was considered null: "The negative aspects of their civilization can be found in the artistic domain" (Gomez Rios, 1952:9).

Another statement explained to us that "The arts backwardness between Guaranies is caused by its social organization... based in equality" (Bordon, 1928:33). Then, the artistic forms cannot exist because these "Primitive cultures scarcely developed their speech only"(Cardozo, 1965:33).

The implicit racism of those concepts, becomes political in others: "Guaranies are communists up to their end..." (Cardozo:37).

Figure 5: Natural rock layer identified as foundations of a Viking church, which "measures are in Danish feet". After Pistilli, 1978:71.

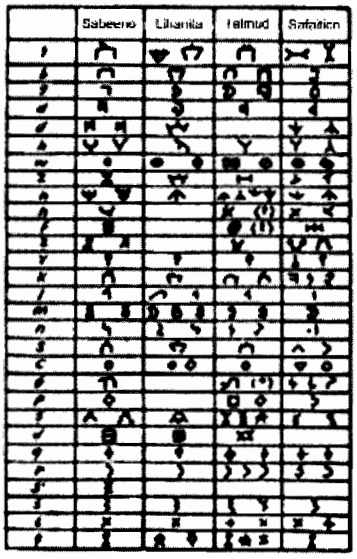

Figure 6: South Semite alphabets claimed to be deciphered in Paraguayan petroglyphs. After Ottolenghi, 1979:158.

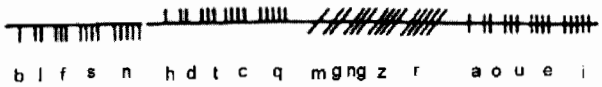

Figure 7: An "Ogam" alphabet that allowed its author to translate parallel engraved lines into messages.

Sometimes historians cannot deny the reality and values of some artistic expressions (as the chants and music renowned until to day). They minimize them explaining to us that both were products acquired from other cultures: "The Guarani music is from Polynesian origin." (Pistilli, 1978:25)

This elaborated negative past did not allow for recognition of what the natives explained to them, because "their traditions are not known by writings or by ieroglyhs, because they did not have them" (Prieto, 1988:44).

When a researcher like Chaves received direct explanations about the paintings and engravings that were made "by our god Zume... which left his printings on rocks and caves", he quickly dismisses the explanation telling us that it was "nothing more than a legend" (Chaves 1958:28).

Within this atmosphere, from 1950 forward, arose some pseudo-researchers of Paraguayan past that found an ample field for their imagination and exalted ego in society beliefs, formal education and an academic vacuum (Paraguay does not elicit any archaeological or anthropologic academic degree). This last quality allows them to create archaeological "egofacts" (Consens, 1999).

In several publications, they maintain that engravings were inscriptions from groups that visited Paraguay. These voyageurs were the ones that enlighten the material and aesthetic knowledge that current native groups possess.

These writers explained with full details the trips made by the Thirteen Lost Tribe of Israel, or the Vikings who built stone fortress, and the Normans who also brought their cows with them.

Together with their marvelous and luxuriant imagination that invented exotic meanings to rock art, some of them also faked some designs (as we could see in our visit) to reinforce their statements. In this way they gave us new and bizarre explanations to confirm the physical presence of some groups in the past. For example, we have to see the *Guayaquie's* penis that rest on the right side of his body: in the same way that Viking's penis did. This was a proof that both ethnic groups contacted. This seems to us a very peculiar way to relate rock art with anatomic biology (Mahieu, 1979; Ottolenghi, 1979; Pistilli, 1979; Woodman, 1989; Schobinger, 1973).

After those publications, a fever to acquire the meaning of all kind of engravings exploded quickly and imaginatively. As a first result the following alphabets have been "identified" in Paraguayan Rock Art: Phoenician, Classic and Archaic Greek, Archaic Hebrew, north of Arabic Peninsula, Celtic, Viking, Egyptian, Chinese, Norman, Semite, Lihanit, Archaic Rabbinic Vertical, Talmudic, Saphaitic, Sabeen, Medieval Norwegian, *Ogham* (cryptic ancient for Celtic peoples), Iberian Celtic, Old Gaelic and Southern Gaelic.

As we can see in these classifications, ethnic, religious, linguistics, cultural, chronological and geographical criteria were used together.

If any of these "inscriptions" offered any kind of difficulty in being translated by these "experts", they gave us a new and quick explanation: "*Ogham* alphabet is similar to the bar code (Universal Product Code) used in supermarkets" (Woodman, 1989).

This entire dubious and erroneous misinformation context had an impact on Paraguayan society that does not have any antecedent by its diffusion and span with any other country of South America.

Figures 8 & 9:
Gasory rock shelter (Amabay Cordillera). Partial details.

The "runic inscriptions" as they are called, can be found in textbooks and diffusion ones, in the media, in tourist leaflets, in schools and Governmental information.

The above mentioned fever omits, from the formal education, Schmidt's early publications (Susnik, 1991), and the numerous and priceless ones from Susnik (between 1959 to 1998), or the first rock art record made in Paraguay by Pallestrini and Perasso (1984).

What seems peculiar is that even in the detailed analysis of the indigenous artistic expressions made by Escobar which includes ceramics, tattooing, body painting, basketry, feather ornaments, weaving, musical instruments and ceremonies, there is no reference to rock art at all. (Escobar, 1982)

So, it seems clear to us that only a new and pertinent perspective of prehistory can critically judge statements of this kind: "The Guayaquies indigenous are not primitive. They are degenerate" (Pistilli, 1978:23).

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

We summarized that the impact of those non-qualified foreign statements about strange "Argonauts" stigmatized culture, education, tourism, and even the past in Paraguay. These unwise and acrimonious opinions, undermined cultural and social concepts, historical perspectives and they promoted ethnic devaluation.

Because of this we think that the main problem for researchers who visited the rock art sites were not, as expected, the usual stylistic analysis and time classifications, but to fight against social belief. Against a social attitude that had expected our only task was to decode new inscriptions.

The Ecocultura Foundation invitation resulted in a surprisingly, high value and enriched professional experience that challenged and reinforced our ethno-anthropological approaches.

Any kind of revision of this situation is exceptionally complex. It will need ample doses of dedication, goodwill, initiative and mainly dialogue between the parties, to reconstruct Paraguayan prehistory, which is an indispensable part of their identity.

Acknowledgments: To Raúl González Allen and Luis Ullón from Fundación Ecocultura: their invitation allows us to share valuable experiences. To the Municipal Intendente from Pedro Juan Caballero, Dn. Anselmo Jara Carvallo. To Dr. Luis do Amaral, from Pedro Juan Caballero. To the Director of Ethnographic Museum Andrés Barbero, Lic. Adelina Pusineri. To the Family González -Buss for the hearty support they gave us as a result of an accident we suffered during our stay.

References Cited

Bordon, Clotilde
1928 "Historia del Paraguay". Talleres Gráficos "*El Arte*". 106 pgs. Asunción.

Cardozo, Efrain
1965 "*Breve Historia del Paraguay*". EUDEBA, 170 pgs, Buenos Aires.

Claude de Lezcano, Irmina
1994 "*Estudios sociales, 3º curso*". Talleres industriales Comuneros. 228 pgs. Asunción.
1997 "*Estudios sociales, 4º curso*". Talleres industriales Comuneros. 229 pgs. Asunción.